

Folk conceptualisation of small talk: A view from a Japanese online discussion forum

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the perceptions of small talk shared by the users of a Japanese online community, seeking information on their expected speech and behaviour in small talk and factors contributing to positive/negative evaluations of small talk. The study investigates a discussion thread consisting of 73 responses to a contributor's request for advice on improving small talk capabilities from the perspectives of interaction ritual (Goffman 1967), balancing obligations (Ohashi 2008, 2013, 2021) and typology of speech acts (Edmondson & House 1981; House & Kádár 2022b).

KEYWORDS

small talk, compliments, balancing obligations, (im)politeness, speech acts

1. INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the reduction in opportunities for small talk led to a reassessment of its importance, which had previously gone unnoticed. An increasing number of articles about small talk has caught people's attention in social media, including "How to make small talk after we've been through a pandemic" (Vice),¹ "Covid got your tongue? How to relearn the

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¹<https://www.vice.com/en/article/4adjpm/how-to-make-small-talk-after-weve-been-through-a-pandemic> <accessed 12-2-2023>.

lost art of office small talk” (The Guardian)² and many more. The survey study conducted by Murayama & Sugawara (2022) reveals that small talk is significant in maintaining mental health. This present study aims to uncover how small talk, 雑談 (*zatsudan*) in Japanese, is evaluated and conceptualised in a Japanese online discussion forum, and to explore the multidisciplinary field of ritual and interpersonal pragmatics from the perspectives of the typology of speech acts and balancing obligations (Ohashi 2008, 2010, 2013).

Specifically, the study will explore the perceptions about small talk shared in a Japanese online community, i.e. what users think they are expected to say and do in small talk, and what contributes to the positive/negative evaluation of small talk.

The study approaches small talk from the point of view of interaction ritual (Goffman 1967), where people look after mutual face (see below for further explanation). Coupland (2003) describes that commonly understood small talk is a “comfortable ritual” (Coupland 2003, 5), as it is associated with phatic communication over safe topics. Kádár (2013, 2017) identifies common features of ritual which include recurrence, liminality (changing/transforming the state of relationship), and moral obligation. Small talk can be ritual as it is recurrent and thus predictable amongst cultural insiders. It is liminal as it can occur between activities and can potentially transform participants’ interpersonal relations. Participants observe and enforce/transgress moral order (Garfinkel 1964; Kádár 2017) as they engage in small talk, and their evaluation has direct bearing on the notion of (im)politeness, in other words, relational evaluative phenomena.

The data of this study are sourced from a Japanese online community where users ask and answer questions using their handle names. A specific thread was selected in which users give advice to the instigator who asks for advice on how to improve her small talk skills.

First, high frequency terms are identified, and examples are qualitatively analysed in context. Second, drawing on previous research, Edmondson & House (1981) and House & Kádár (2022a), specific speech acts which are associated with *zatsudan* from a lay perspective are illuminated. In the following, some of the key concepts in interpreting data are illustrated, which include ritual and face-work, norms, small talk, and first-order and second-order perspectives.

2. RITUAL AND FACE-WORK

Goffman conceptualises ritual in relation to ‘facework’, which he argues is based on ‘basic rules of social interaction’.

A person’s performance of face-work, extended by his [sic] tacit agreement to help others perform theirs, represents his [sic] willingness to abide by the ground rules of social interaction. (Goffman 1967, 31)

The ground rules of social interaction in Goffman’s sense is reciprocal obligation.

²<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2022/jan/29/covid-got-your-tongue-how-to-relearn-the-lost-art-of-office-small-talk> <accessed 12-2-2023>.



The combined effect of the rule of self-respect and the rule of considerateness is that the person tends to conduct himself during an encounter so as to maintain both his own face and the face of the other participants. (Goffman 1967, 11)

This translates into moment-by-moment conversational participants' behaviour, as Goffman aptly puts, "If I do or do not act in this way, will I or others lose face?" he [sic] decides at each moment, consciously or unconsciously, how to behave" (Goffman 1967, 36). This is because "[t]he person not only defends his own face and protects the face of the other..." (Goffman 1967, 29).

For Goffman, ritual is essentially mutual obligation and those who are not ritually delicate may cause negative "judgemental contingencies of the situation" (Goffman 1967, 31). Therefore, ritual is an embodiment of mutually understood social norms which safeguard mutual face. In this sense, ritual is effectively interpersonal face-work and the way one handles ritual is significant in interpersonal pragmatics where (im)politeness is the central concern. In his later work, Goffman (1971) emphasises the reciprocal nature of ritual.

When a ritual offering occurs, when, that is, one individual provides a sign of involvement in and connectedness to another, it behooves the recipient to show that the message has been received, that its import has been appreciated, that the affirmed relationship actually exists as the performer implies, that the performer himself has worth as a person, and finally, that the recipient has an appreciative, grateful nature. (Goffman 1971, 63)

From a (non)linguistic socialisation perspective, Kádár (2017) explains that ritual is mimetic in nature in a sense that "it re-enacts social and/or interpersonal values in a recurrent performance of symbols (Blackmore 2007), that is, linguistic and non-linguistic elements that bear special significance within a social structure" (Kádár 2017, 15). If we combine this with Goffman's sense of ritual, participants of social practice must have common mimetic resources to enact mutual obligations in accordance with social norms. Kádár (2017) also includes the notion of 'liminality' in his sense of ritual. He explains that liminality is a threshold which defines what is acceptable and what is not. The liminality indexes salience in relationality, and thus it is the site of evaluative phenomena, i.e. (im)politeness.

The notion of ritual which is characterised by mutually obligatory, recurrent, mimetic, and liminal nature, therefore, provides a new insight in understanding small talk.

3. NORMS

Recurrent practices must not be harmful to interpersonal relations, and thus norms are closely related to rituals and face-work. Long-standing communities are bound to have certain ways of doing things which participants observe and follow. Such norms often go unnoticed until someone violates them, either intentionally or unintentionally. Wenger (1998) names such longstanding communities as communities of practice (CoP). It is a "joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members" that functions by "mutual engagement that bind[s] members together into a social entity" and produces a "shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time" (Wenger 1998, 73). It overlaps with the notion of 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1990) which focuses on the interplay and duality of the "structured structure" and "structuring



structure” (Bourdieu 1990, 53) and is frequently deployed across disciplines of social science and beyond.

Bardsley & Miller (2011) associate it with the Japanese notion of *kata*, standardised forms and movements of martial arts and many traditional art forms such as the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and even bowing and greeting.

They argue that habitus is something we take for granted, and thus it is unnoticeable in many cases, but *kata* makes these social codes of behaviour explicit and noticeable.

Habitus becomes our common sense, so innate that we can easily fail to see how much this training has marked us as part of a certain social class, religion, nation, and gender. *Kata*-training, then, is the deliberate and conscious adoption of a new habitus. (Bardsley & Miller 2011, 9)

It can be said that Japanese *kata*-training is a conscious effort of indexing oneself as a desirable model according to a given social expectation. It represents a unique contrast to norms as unmarked behavior, as in habitus.

3.1. Interactional norms

Japanese interactional ritual of encounter, *aisatsu* (greetings) is a norm driven and highly predictable interactional *kata*. Ide (2009) defines *aisatsu* as follows.

... *aisatsu* refers to the ritual of encounters that permeates the everyday conduct of Japanese society, it also forms a nexus of social etiquette linguistically and non-linguistically speaking, functioning as a lubricant in keeping social relations smooth and in a culturally appropriate manner. (Ide 2009, 18)

Aisatsu reflects norms and values of a given community. The way one handles *aisatsu* often reveals one’s ritual sensitivity and understanding of their *tachiba* (positioning of self in a web of social structure).

4. SMALL-TALK

Small talk is defined here as a spontaneous interaction of two or more participants. It is spontaneous because there is no predetermined tasks to achieve. Small talk is often referred to as phatic communication which Malinowski defines as “language used in free, aimless, social intercourse”, and “mere exchange of words” (Malinowski 1923, 149). However, Malinowski also recognises the social significance of phatic communication where “ties of union are created” (Malinowski 1923, 151). Coupland (2003) also emphasises the social bonding aspect of it, and she distinguishes it from communication intended to exchange information. Topics for small talk are highly predictable, and are “confined to the ‘public’ aspects of the person: for example, the weather, superficial dimensions of health, activities on weekends or holidays, everyday activities (e.g. school, evening plans, television programs and movies)” (Davis 2004, 221), and general aspects of something from immediate situation (Schneider 1987). There is also an obligatory aspect of it. If one encounters his/her work colleague in a lift, a rather confined space, one feels obliged to engage in small talk or *aisatsu* to demonstrate ritual sensitivity as a sign of face-work. Ohashi (2021) investigates first encounter interactions of participants in Tokyo (Japanese speaking) and Melbourne (English speaking) from the perspective of balancing



obligations, which assumes that “conversational partners balance obligations, from the level of micro turn-taking to macro discourse” (Ohashi 2021, 31), and confirms that participants observe reciprocal expectations and obligations in conversational feedback/backchannelling (*aizuchi*), nodding, smiling, and turn-taking.

5. FIRST ORDER (EMIC AND ETIC) AND SECOND ORDER UNDERSTANDINGS OF SMALL TALK

It is important to understand social and ritual aspects of small talk from multiple vantage points. Kádár & Haugh’s (2013) distinction of first-order and second-order perspectives are beneficial to this study. Rather than following the conventional distinction, participant vs analyst, commonly used in the study of (im)politeness, they associate the first-order and second-order distinction with particular evaluative moments of situated meaning. First-order involves participants only, and they engage in social practices where they evaluate emerging meaning ‘here and now’ or perhaps simply participate in the meaning making practice. Second-order involves an observer’s vantage points, from which s/he evaluates phenomena ‘there and then’. Kádár & Haugh (2013) argue that “[w]hile the first-order/second-order distinction has generally been held to be between participant and analyst understandings of politeness, we suggest that this neglects a further two loci of understanding” (Kádár & Haugh 2013, 85). They add further distinctions which include the one between insiders and outsiders as well as that of between lay observers and analysts; both loci exhibit different understandings of a social practice that the conventional first-order/second-order distinction fails to explain.

The present study takes such distinctions into account in order to make sense of ‘small talk’ in the context of an advice-seeking/advice-giving online forum. The online forum reflects multiple viewpoints as all participants discuss and give their views on an advice-seeker’s past small talk experiences. They are therefore participants in the making of meaning in the forum, but at the same time they adopt the observer’s point of view and self-reflection. In recognition of this complexity, the present study takes into account multiple perspectives and evaluative moments.

6. DATA: ONLINE ADVICE SEEKING/GIVING FORUM

An online advice seeking/giving forum is used to find out any recurrent terms, themes, and common speech acts amongst comments and advice on improving small talk ability. Following data were obtained from a popular advice seeking/giving online community which is operated by a Japanese newspaper website. A person, whose handle name is *Karashi* (pseudo name),³ posted her message with the following title asking for advice to improve her small talk ability, 雑談能力 *zatsudan nouryoku*.

³ All the participants’ handle names were anonymised.



- (1) 雑談能力が 無さ過ぎて辛いです。アドバイス願います。
zatsudan nouryoku ga nasa sugite tsuraidesu. adobaisu negai masu.
 ‘I suffer as I lack small talk (ability) skills. Please give me advice.’

Karashi claims to be a mother in her late 30s with three children. Her message includes the painful experience of not being able to converse or build friendships at school and workplace.

- (2) 周囲のママ達は 仕事の種類や有無に関わらず、色々なネタで気楽に雑談を
shuui no mama tachi wa shigoto no shurui ya umu ni kakawarazu, iroiro na neta de
kiraku ni zatsudan wo
 楽しめるのに、私は無理。頭空っぽ。
tanoshimeru noni, watashi wa muri. atama karappo.

ニュースも見ると読書もするし毎日家事育児頑張ってるつもりなのに。
nyuusu mo mirushi dokusho mo surushi mainichi kaji ikuji ganbatteru tsumori nanoni.
 皆は普通の日常からネタを見つけて瞬時に言葉にできて笑顔で
minawa futsuu no nichijou kara neta wo mitsukete shunji ni kotoba ni dekite egao de
 コミュニケーションとれるのに、私には その能力がありません。
kominikeishon toreru noni, watashi niwa sono nouryoku ga arimasen.
 聞けば知っているネタでも、それを話題にする 能力がないのです。
kikeba shitteiru neta demo, sorewo wadaini suru nouryoku ga nainodesu.
 鍛える方法はないでしょうか...
kitaeru houhou wa naideshouka...

‘The mothers around me, regardless of the type of work they do and whether they have a job or not, can comfortably enjoy small talk about all sorts of stuff, but I can’t. My brain is empty.

I watch the news, I read, I do my best at housework and childcare every day. Everyone else can find topics from their normal daily life and instantly put it into words and communicate with a smile, but I don’t have that ability.

Even though I know the stories when I hear them, I don’t have the ability to talk about them. Is there any way to train [my small talk skills]...?’ [English translation by the author]

Karashi’s post attracted 73 responses, many of which take account of *Karashi*’s experiences and social position, i.e. late 30s with three children.

First, frequently occurring content words are identified in order to find common themes, beliefs and expected ritual in small talk. [Table 1](#) below summarises the frequently occurring vocabulary in the online forum.

雑談 *zatsudan* appears most frequently (100 counts), and it is quite understandable as it is the topic of the forum. The second most frequent word is 自分 *jibun* (self) and the third is 相手 *aite* (interlocutor), 79 and 63 counts respectively. This suggests that many comments revolved around the two axes (self and interlocutor), reflecting Goffman’s ‘ground rules of social interaction’, that is “[t]he combined effect of the rule of self-respect and the rule of considerateness” (Goffman 1967, 11). Further, these two focal points of interaction can be interpreted as reciprocal obligation or balancing obligations (Ohashi 2008, 2013, 2021). The fourth and the fifth most frequent words are 笑顔/笑う *egao/warau* (smiling face/to smile) and 相槌 *aizuchi* (feedback/backchanneling), 32 and 26 counts respectively. They actually co-occur in many other



Table 1. Frequently occurring vocabulary in the online forum

Word	Meaning	Frequency
雑談 <i>Zatsudan</i>	Small talk Literal meaning: Miscellaneous or idle talk	100
自分 <i>Jibun</i>	Self	79
相手 <i>Aite</i>	Interlocutor	63
笑顔/笑う <i>Egao/Warau</i>	Smiling face/to laugh	32
相槌 (incl. 相づち) <i>Aizuchi</i>	Feedback/backchanneling	26
頷く <i>Unazuku</i>	Nodding	2
興味 <i>Kyoumi</i> 関心 <i>Kanshin</i>	Interest	24
質問する <i>Shitsumon suru</i>	To ask questions	13
挨拶 <i>Aisatsu</i>	Greeting	11

comments. The rest are listed as follows, 興味 *kyoumi* (interest) (22), 質問する *shitsumon suru* (ask questions) (13) and 挨拶 *aisatsu* (greeting) (11).

In the following, each frequently occurring term is examined qualitatively, using actual data from the forum.

6.1. 雑談 *Zatsudan* (Small talk)

As mentioned, the high frequency of *zatsudan* is predictable. There are many posts talking about what to say in small talk, but the following example is unique because the poster, *Tama*, indicated at the end of the message, conceptualises and defines small talk.

- (3) 雑談は、周囲の人といい距離を保ちながら 場を和ますための
Zatsudan wa, shuui no hito to ii kyori wo tamochinagara ba wo nagomasutameno
 一つの手段 (Tama)
hitotsu no shudan
 ‘Small talk is a means to create a friendly atmosphere while keeping a good distance from others.’

Tama even offers a trope which captures the essence of small talk.

- (4) 雑談はいわば、お互いに「いかが?」と手持ちの飴ちゃんや袋菓子
Zatsudan wa iwaba, otagaini "ikaga?" to temochi no amechan ya fukurogashi wo
 差し出しあうようなもの、その時はちょっといい気持ちになっても、
sashidashiau younamono, sono tokiwa chotto iikimochini nattemo,
 後には何も残りません (Tama)
ato niwa nanimo nokorimasen
 ‘Small talk, so to speak, is like offering candy and sweets to each other and saying “Would you like some?” We feel good about ourselves then, but nothing remains afterwards.’



According to *Tama*'s folk emic understanding of small talk, it is essentially an exchange of something small amongst participants in order for them to feel good about themselves while maintaining a certain distance, but it has little substance nor lasting impact. *Tama*'s explanation can be interpreted in the analyst's terms, which is conceptualized as a mutual balancing of obligations for the sake of face-work.

6.2. 自分 *Jibun* (self)

Jibun can be used as I, as in *Jibun mo zatsudan nigate desu* (I am not good at small talk, either), referring to an advice-giver him/herself. Such use is disregarded in the analysis. The uses of *jibun* here are predominantly related to advice-giver's referring to *Karashi*, the advice-seeker. Some recurrent themes are emerging as follows.

6.2.1. Don't blame yourself.

- (5) 自分を責めることないです。(Sachi)
jibun wo semeru koto nai desu.
 'There is no need to blame yourself.'
- (6) 十分立派。そんなに自分を責めることない。(Mei)
juubun rippa. sonnani jibun wo semeru koto nai.
 'You are excellent enough. There is no need to blame yourself that much.'
- (7) 自分の雑談能力を過小評価しすぎなのだと思います。(Nori)
jibun no zatsudan nouryoku wo kashouhyouka shisugi nanoda to omoi masu.
 'I think you underestimate your small-talk ability too much.'
- (8) 必要以上にご自分を「会話能力が無い」って決め付けているだけの様な
hitsuyou ijouni go jibun wo "kaiwa nouryokuga nai" tte kimetsuketeiru dakeno youna
 気がします。(Haru)
ki ga shi masu.
 'I feel that you're just assuming yourself to be "incapable of conversation" unnecessarily.'

These comments are not related to small talk skills, but they indicate participants' sympathetic attitudes towards *Karashi*. They suggest that *Karashi* should not blame herself. There is another pattern of reaction containing *jibun*. The following comments advise *Karashi* that it is more important to be interested in what others have to say and listen carefully than to offer topics and talk about them.

6.2.2. You should be a good listener.

- (9) 自分が話さなくても良い聞き役になればいい。(Tombo)
Jibun ga hanasanakute mo yoi kikiyakuni nareba ii.
 'You don't have to do the talking, just be a good listener.'



- (10) 自分が弁舌 をふるう必要は ありません。(Piko)
jibun ga benzetsu wo furuu hitsuyou wa ari masen.
 ‘You do not have to make a speech.’
- (11) 自分から面白い話題を 提供しなきゃ、というのではなくて、
jibun kara omoshiroi wadai wo teikyou shinakya, to iu no dewa nakute,
 相手の話を よく聞くようにしたらいかがでしょうか。(Tika)
aite no hanashi wo yoku kiku younishitara ikaga deshou ka.
 ‘It is not that you have to provide interesting topics, how about making an effort to listen to your interlocutor?’

It is very interesting to witness these self and alter (other) orientations which emerge from the participants’ advice. They also seem to reflect Goffman’s ground rules of social interaction, namely ‘self-respect’ and ‘considerateness’ (consideration to other). The former (Don’t blame yourself) reinforces *Karashi*’s self-esteem, and the latter (You should be a good listener) reminds her of the importance of ‘considerateness’. The following key word 相手 *aite* (interlocutor) further emphasises the importance of the alter orientation.

6.3. 相手 *Aite* (Interlocutor)

- (12) 相手の話を 聞こうという姿勢になればいい。
Aite no hanashi wo kikou to iu shiseini nareba ii.
相手の話に集中する (Tamago)
aite no hanashi ni shuuchuuusuru
 ‘It would be good if you have an attitude to listen to what your interlocutor has to say. Focus on his/her talk.’
- (13) 相手の話をよく 聞くようにしたらいかがでしょうか。(Tika)
Aite no hanashi wo yoku kiku younishitara ikagadeshou ka.
 ‘How about making a conscious effort to listen to what your interlocutor has to say?’
- (14) まず相手に 関心をもって みましょう。(Kaede)
Mazu aiteni kanshin wo motte mimashou.
 ‘First, let’s show interest in the other party.’
- (15) 相手の話す言葉に耳を傾け 『うんうん...そうだね』と相槌をうちきちんと
Aiteno hanasu kotobani mimi wo katamuke 「un un ... soudane」 to aizuchi wo uchi
kichinto
 話を 聞くことが一番だと思います。(Minton)
hanashi wo kiku koto ga ichiban da to omoi masu.
 ‘I think the best thing to do is to listen to what the other person has to say, and to interject *aizuchi* saying “ummm ... yes, that’s right” and to listen to what they have to say.’



All these comments also emphasise the importance of listenership during interaction and consideration to the interlocutor. In (15), *Minton* added the *aizuchi*, backchannelling, as an important factor.

6.4. 笑顔 *egao* (smiling face)

笑顔 *egao* tends to co-occur with other frequently appearing key terms such as *aizuchi* (feedback/backchanneling) and *aisatsu* (greetings).

- (16) 笑顔で聞いて 相槌を打つ。(Tika)
Egao de kiite aizuchi wo utsu.
 'Listen to your interlocutor with a smile and with backchannels.'
- (17) 明るく笑顔で挨拶を続ける。(Kei)
Akaruku egao de aisatsu wo tsuzukeru.
 'Continue greeting with a cheerful smile.'

Many participants refer to the importance of smiling. It is one of the extra-linguistic resources which is required to accompany other key elements which are effective in balancing obligations.

6.5. 相槌/(also written as) 相づち *Aizuchi* (Backchanneling)

相槌 *Aizuchi* is a compound word consisting of 相 *Ai* and 槌 *Tsuchi*; 相 means mutual and 槌 is a hammer. This word originates from a practice of sword-making where multiple workers in turns, hit heated metal to shape them into swords. Therefore, *aizuchi* depicts sword makers' alternate pounding metal motions and sound responding to each other. Therefore, *aizuchi* in modern Japan means reactive small verbal feedback given to the conversational turn-holder. Because of the original meaning of the word, the expression such as *aizuchi wo utsu* (hit the *aizuchi*) is commonly used to mean interjecting feedback or backchanneling.

- (18) 会話力 より 相槌力 (*Tamago*)
kaiwaryoku yori aizuchiryoku
 'Aizuchi ability is more important than conversational ability.'
- (19) 笑顔で 相づちうって 相手が 言いたい であろう語尾や言葉を
Egao de aizuchi utte aite ga iitai dearou gobi ya kotoba wo
 相づちうち ながら使ったりするだけで 会話してる風になります(笑) (*Akebono*)
aizuchi uchi nagara tsukattarisuru dakede kaiwa shiteru fuuni narimasu (wara: LoL)
 'Just smiling, interjecting *aizuchi* and using the endings and words you think the other person is going to say can make it seem like you're having a conversation. (LoL)'
- (20) 話したくなければ、相槌を打つくらいでも良いと思いますよ? (*Kaede*)
Hanashitaku nakere ba, aizuchi wo utsu kurai demo yoi to omoimasu yo?
 'If you don't want to talk, I think just *aizuchi* would be enough.'



- (21) いいあんばいで相槌を打ち、話に入って いけそうだったら
Iianbai de aizuchi wo uchi, hanashi ni haitte ikesou dattara
 入るとか。(Taria)
hairutoka.
 ‘Interject *aizuchi* appropriately, and when it seems possible, enter into the conversation, perhaps.’
- (22) 雑談を 聞いて相槌打つ... それで いいではありませんか。(Mei)
zatsudan wo kiite aizuchi utsu... sorede iidewa arimasenka.
 ‘You listen to your interlocutor’s small talk and offer *aizuchi* ...isn’t it sufficient?’
- (23) 雑談など、相手の話を 聞いて共感し、相槌など 反応を 返せば、
zatsudan nado, aite no hanashi wo kiite kyoukanshi, aizuchi nado hannou wo kaeseba,
 それで十分ですよ (Tama)
sorede juubun desuyo
 ‘Small talk is simply a matter of listening to what the interlocutor has to say, empathizing, and responding with *aizuchi* and etc.’

Aizuchi is thought to be very important in small talk. *Tamago* in (18) uses the title “*Aizuchi* ability is more important than conversational ability”, and emphasises the importance of being a good listener. *Akebono* in (19) suggests that the poster, *Karashi*, should be able to feel like engaging in interaction if she smiles, interjects with *aizuchi* and jointly completes sentence endings with the interlocutor. This reveals *Akebono*’s understanding of the *kata* of interaction. Many of the responses to the poster in fact revolve around the theme of the strategic use of *aizuchi* in satisfying the essential and the minimum requirements in engaging in small talk which consists of listening to the interlocutor and *aizuchi* including nodding, (20)~(23). This supports *Ohashi*’s (2021) argument that *aizuchi* contributes to balancing mutual obligations in rectifying perceived imbalance of conversational contribution.

6.6. 興味 *Kyoumi* (Interest)

Kyoumi is interest. The participants find it necessary to have a genuine interest with the interlocutor.

- (24) 程良い距離感を持つての他人への興味は 必須ですよ。(Piko)
Hodoyoi kyori wo motte no tanin e no kyoumi wa hissu desu yo.
 ‘It is essential to have interest in others while keeping appropriate distance.’
- (25) 本当に 会話を 続けたければ、相手に興味を 持つことです。(Michiru)
Hontouni kaiwa wo tsuzuketakereba, aite ni kyoumi wo motsukoto desu.
 ‘If you really want to keep the conversation going, you have to be interested in your interlocutor.’
- (26) 根本的に 他人に興味がないんですよ。(Goma)
Konponteki ni tanin ni kyoumi ga nain desu yone.
 ‘Fundamentally, we’re not interested in other people.’



In (24) *Piko* states that it is essential to be interested in the interlocutor, however, *Piko* also refers to the importance of keeping appropriate social distance and avoiding asking personal questions. *Michiru*'s comment in (25) also emphasises the importance of being interested in the interlocutor. These comments support the alter orientation, consideration to the interlocutor. In (26), *Goma* admits that s/he has 'low small talk ability' and relates it to her/his little interest to others. Unlike, *aizuchi* and *egao*, listening to and being genuinely interested in the interlocutor, is not strategic advice, but essential requirement as a conversationalist.

6.7. 質問する *Shitsumon suru* (ask questions)

Asking questions is important in small talk and it is valued in this community. It is an explicit indication of showing *kyoumi* (interest) and it can be strategic. Asking a question does not necessarily seek information, but it plays an important relational role in small talk ([Ohashi & Chang 2017](#)), as it contributes to establishing common ground as well as to showing interest to the interlocutor ([Ohashi 2021](#)).

- (27) 気負わずに「今日は寒いですね。」とか、どんなテレビを見るのですか？
Kiowazuni "Kyou wa samui desu ne" toka, donna terebi wo miru no desu ka?
 とかなんでもいいので質問してみましょう。相手は何か答えてくれる
toka nandemo iinode shitsumonshite mi mashou. Aite wa nanika kotaete kureru
 でしょう。そこからが始まりです。(Kaede)
deshou. Sokokara ga hajimari desu.
 'Don't be too eager to be perfect, just ask questions such as "It's cold today, isn't it?" and "What TV programme do you watch?" and etc. Your partner should respond to you, and you can go from there.'
- (28) 職場等で 雑談が 必要な 時は 相手に質問して
Shokubatou de zatsudan ga hitsuyouna toki wa aiteni shitsumonshite
 喋ってもらいます。(Goma)
shabette moraimasu.
 'When I need to make small talk, like at work, I ask people questions to get them talking.'
- (29) 興味 深く 聞いていると、当然相槌が、感嘆が、質問が、(...)
Kyoudi bukaku kiiteiruto touzen aizuchi ga kantan ga shitsumon ga, (...)
 出ます。そこからまた会話が生まれます。(Ando)
de masu. soko kara mata kaiwa ga umare masu.
 'Listening with interest, of course, leads to *aizuchi*, exclamations, and questions. From there, another conversation is born.'

Because the initial post by *Karashi* was so eager to improve small talk ability, those comments suggest that *Karashi* should relax and simply rely on the conversational partner and just ask questions. These comments also show that small talk requires a mutual involvement.



6.8. 挨拶 *Aisatsu* (the ritual of encounters)

Aisatsu is commonly translated as greetings in English. Ide explains *aisatsu* is engrained in Japanese cultural norms as the ritual of encounters.

While *aisatsu* refers to the ritual of encounters that permeates the everyday conduct of Japanese society, it also forms a nexus of social etiquette linguistically and non-linguistically speaking, functioning as a lubricant in keeping social relations smooth and in a culturally appropriate manner. (Ide 2009, 18)

Participants who refer to *aisatsu* reveal what is expected at an encounter.

- (30) 関係づくりで大事なのは挨拶です。明るく笑顔で挨拶を続ける。
Kankei zukuri de daijinano wa aisatsu desu. Akaruku egao de aisatsu wo tsuzukeru.
 返されても返されなくても気にせず挨拶を続けましょう。(Iiko)
Kaesaretemo kaesarenakutemo kinisezu aisatsu wo tsuzukemashou.
 ‘The most important part of relationship building is greeting. Continue to greet people with a bright smile. Do not worry if your greeting is reciprocated or not, just keep on greeting.’
- (31) 挨拶などマナーを守れば、それでいいでしょう。(Mei)
Aisatsu nado manaa wo mamoreba, sorede iideshou.
 ‘Just be sure to greet people and in good manners, and you’ll be good to go.’
- (32) 基本的な挨拶は 絶対に欠かさない。挨拶するときにはにこやかに。(Koto)
Kihontekina aisatsu wa zettaini kakasanai. Aisatsu surutoki wa nikoyakani.
 ‘Never miss a basic greeting. When you greet people, do so with a smile.’
- (33) まず、挨拶はするでしょ?その後一言加えるだけ。(Zen)
Mazu, aisatsu wa surudesho? sono ato ni hitokoto kuwaeru dake.
 「おはようございます。— ちゃん いつも元気ねえ」
"Ohayougozaimasu — chan itsumo genkinee"
 お子さんネタでひと言。
Okosan neta de hito koto.
 いつもハツラツしてるね。
Itsumo hatsu ratsu shiteru ne.
 髪型 いつも可愛く結んでて どうやるの?
Kamigata itsumo kawaiku musundete douyaruno?
 お子さん しっかりしてるね。どうやって育てたらこんなに
okosan shikkari shiteru ne. douyatte sodatetara konnani
 しっかりするんだろう?
shikkari surundarou?
 ‘First, you say your *aisatsu*, don’t you? Then you just add one phrase:
 "Good morning. your — chan³ looks always energetic."
 Then add a phrase in relation to the child related topics.



S/he is always lively.

You always tie your child's hair nicely. How do you do it?

Your child is so mature. I wonder how you raise her/him?

These comments emphasise the importance of the enactment of *aisatsu* as social norms. This is something one cannot do without in a social encounter. All the comments above resonate with Ide's definition of *aisatsu*, referring to "keeping social relations smooth and in a culturally appropriate manner" (Ide 2009, 18). Particularly, (33) is revealing in relation to *Kata. Zen* gives a specific example of starting from *aisatsu* then moving on to small talk. In this example, *aisatsu* consists of a set phrase and a compliment referring to the interlocutor's child. *Aisatsu* is ritual and it is fundamentally alter-oriented and consideration to the interlocutor, and also at the same time complying to the social norm, and thus presenting positive self-image. What is more, *Zen* adds some repertoire of complimenting the interlocutor's children, suggesting that speech act of complimenting is a key to small talk. It closely relates to *Tama's* explanation in (4), "[s]mall talk, so to speak, is the offering of candy and sweets to each other, saying 'Would you like some?'" Their comments suggest that offering each other something small (including a compliment) or in second order analyst's term, reciprocal balancing obligation for the sake of face work is, a common feature of small talk in the community.

So far the participants' comments refer to the importance of self-respect – 'don't blame yourself', consideration to the interlocutor – 'have interest in the interlocutor' and 'ask questions'. They also include some strategies and social norms to follow, including smile, *aizuchi*, *aisatsu*, and reciprocating compliments.

The online advice seeking/giving site provides us with the folk notion of small talk which interestingly reflects Goffman's notion of ritual which is an embodiment of social norms, balancing obligations and mutual face-work.

7. DISCUSSION ON SPEECH ACTS AND PHATIC INTERACTION

According to the typology of speech acts (House & Kádár 2022b), 'remark' and 'disclose' are under the phatic cluster. Stating the obvious in a given situation, i.e. 'It is raining outside' is categorised as a 'remark' and sharing information about one's life as a 'disclosure' (Edmondson & House 1981). Although not listed in the phatic cluster, 'compliments' also play an important relational role in interaction. Leech (1983) highlights its convivial function and Brown & Levinson (1987) categorise paying a compliment as positive politeness strategy. Manes & Wolfson (1981), one of the key studies of compliments analysing 686 compliments and responses collected (observed and transcribed) by the authors and their students in the universities in North America, found that "[c]ompliments often serve to initiate a conversation" (Manes & Wolfson 1981, 126) and sometimes replace greetings, and are surprisingly formulaic, and predictable. In Goffman's (1971) sense, paying each other compliments is a ritual.

These speech acts are found in some of the participants' perception of small talk. In the next example, *Kimo* reacting to *Karashi*, explains that people do not talk about anything important in small talk, and gives a very brief example of what *Kimo* considers to be small talk.



7.1. Remark and disclosure

- (34) 「今日寒くない?
"kyou samuknai?"
 わかる～去年より寒くない?
wakaru ~ kyonen yori samukunai?
 そうだよ～。
soudayone ~.
 なんか最近おかしいよね・・・」この程度とかでも雑談だよ。(Kimo)
nanka saikin okashii yone.. "kono teidotoka demo zatsudan dayo."
"It's cold today, isn't it?"
I know... it's colder than last year?
Yes, I know...
Something is not right these days ... – Even something simple like this, it's still small talk.'

"It's cold today, isn't it?" is a 'remark' according to Edmonson & House (1981), and it provides a common topic. A similar example also appears in (27). Talking about weather is indeed a common topic in small talk (Davis 2004). 'Disclose' is another inventory of the phatic cluster, and there are several examples in the data. The following post is a hypothetical conversational dialogue that the contributor, *Piko*, thought would comfort *Karashi*, with the intention that any conversation, no matter how trivial, is fine.

- (35) 「最近逆むけが 酷くって困ってるの。
"saikin sakamuke ga hidokutte komatteru no."
 今〇〇を使っているんだけどイマイチね～」
ima 〇〇 wo tsukatteirundakedo imaichi ne ~"
 すると相手から話してくれますよ。
suruto aite kara hanashite kuremasu yo.
 「私もよ。私は△△。ちょっとおすすめよ」
"watashimoyo. watashiwa △△. chotto osusume yo"
 「本当?〇〇よりも良いかしら?」
"hontou 〇〇 yorimo yoikashira?"
 「〇〇は使ったことないけど、××よりもしっとりするよ」
"〇〇wa tukattakoto naikedo, ×× yorimo shittorisuru yo"
 「良さそうね! 最近出た商品 なの?」
"yosasou ne! saikin deta shouhin nano?"
 「昔からあるわね」(*Piko*)
"mukashikara aru wane"
"I've been having a lot of problems recently with hangnails. I'm using 〇〇 at the moment, but it's not very good..."
 Then the other person will tell you.
"Me too. I'm using △△. I recommend it"
"Really? Is it better than 〇〇?"
"I've never used 〇〇, but it's more moisturising than ××"



"Sounds good! Is this a new product?"
 "It's been around for a long time"

The hypothetical dialogue starts with *Piko*'s disclosure of hangnail issues, and the interlocutor says s/he has the same problem, recommending a certain hand cream. *Piko* asks about the hand cream, and the interlocutor answers. *Piko* thinks that 'disclose' can develop conversation. Another participant, *Mama*, finds topics regarding mistakes and silly stories about her children can develop conversation.

- (36) だんだん子供の失敗談や おバカ話が 自分では話しやすいと気付いたので
dandan kodomo no shippaidan ya obaka banashi ga jibun dewa hanashiyasui to kizuita
node
 ネタを常に何個か 持つように。おかしい間違えとか、寝ぼけた話とか。
neta wo tsuneni nanko ka motsu youni. okashina iimachigae toka, neboketa hanashi
toka (Mama)
 'I gradually realised that it was easier for me to talk about my children's mistakes and
 silly stories, so I always have a few stories in stock. For example, funny
 mispronunciations, sleepwalking stories, and so on.'

Such talk can be classified as 'disclosure'. Such light-hearted self-disclosure is useful as part of the repertoire of small talk because it is sufficiently public and non-threatening to everyone (except perhaps *Mama*'s children).

7.2. Complimenting

Complimenting has been brought up frequently in this discussion thread. In section 6.8 on *aisatsu*, *Zen* suggests that complimenting is a key to small talk, and *Tama* explains that people exchange compliments and pleasantries in small talk. These folk conceptualisations of complimenting support [Manes & Wolfson's \(1981\)](#) study arguing that compliments can initiate interaction and can even replace greetings.

The following example describes a reciprocal aspect of offering compliments.

- (37) 会話のコツは相手を褒めることだと思います。相手を褒めると
kaiwa no kotsu wa aite wo homerukotodato omoimasu. aite wo homeru to
 「じゃああなたは?」というボールが返ってくる。(Hana)
"jaa anatawa?" toiu bouru ga kaette kuru.
 'One of the keys to a successful conversation is to compliment the interlocutor. When
 you give a compliment to the other person, s/he will return the compliment to you.'

8. CONCLUSION

The frequently occurring content words reveal how participants' perceptions about small talk are conceptualised and related to social norms. Small talk is considered as having relational



significance, and thus mutual contributions, ‘offering each other something small’ is expected. Something small can be *aisatsu* (greetings), *aizuchi* (conversational feedback), *egao* (smile), asking questions (showing interest), a remark (saying something obvious), disclosure (sharing information about one’s life), or compliments. Some participants describe common patterns (*kata*) of small talk which typically include these ingredients, and they emphasise mutual contributions and balancing obligations as social norms. If ‘ritual’ is defined as an embodiment of mutually understood social norm which safeguards mutual face, then small talk which is conceptualised through the folk notion of *zatsudan* is considered a ritual.

As online communities have their own target audience, micro-cultures and customs, reflecting their values and attitudes towards small talk, the data from this study should not be taken as a general reflection of Japanese culture at large.

However, further typification of speech acts and comparative studies across different cultures and languages will undoubtedly deepen our understanding of small talk.

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